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Conceptualising and navigating bullying in English secondary schools: a figurational analysis of power imbalances in physical education

Matthew J. Green [a], M. F. Mierzwinski [a] and C. Haines Lyon [b]

[a]School of Sport, York St John University, York, UK; [b]School of Education, Language and Psychology, York St John University, York, UK

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on how secondary school pupils and teachers conceptualise bullying and how pupils navigate bullying within physical education (PE). This ethnographic case study presents findings from participant observations, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews. Applying figurational sociology, power imbalances central to bullying within the PE figuration are analysed. Elias and Scotson's [(1994). *The established and the outsiders*. Sage. (Original work published 1965)] model of established–outsider relations is applied to demonstrate how peer commentary proved an effective power resource that some sporty pupils used to marginalise and exclude perceived less sporty peers. Elias's [(2001). *The society of individuals*. Bloomsbury] personal pronoun model is also utilised to analyse how fear, stigmatisation, and identity self-preservation underpinned a culture of silence in reporting bullying. Throughout our results and discussion, we provided much-needed empirically and theoretically informed insights into the gendered nuances, and similarities, in boys' and girls' experiences of bullying in PE. Finally, we propose a more negotiated PE-specific code of conduct may be more beneficial.

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Bullying; physical education; power; figurational sociology; social exclusion; gossip; culture of silence

Introduction

This article focuses on how secondary school pupils and teachers conceptualise bullying and how pupils navigate bullying within physical education (PE). Despite all state-funded schools in England being legally required to implement an anti-bullying policy (GOV.UK, 2023), the focus of this article is necessary given the prevalence of bullying (John et al., 2023), its detrimental effects (Brown, 2018) and evidence of it taking place within PE (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020). Much of this evidence is based on pupil self-report questionnaires which provide prevalence, risk factor, and location data. Whilst ethnographic data is available (see Atkinson & Kehler, 2012; Jachyra, 2016; Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020a), more is needed to understand how pupils and PE teachers conceptualise bullying, and how the structure, social processes and behavioural norms in PE enable bullying and influence pupils' responses to bullying.

The Department for Education (2017) defines bullying as, 'a behaviour that is: repeated, intended to hurt someone either physically or emotionally; and often aimed at certain groups'. This definition

CONTACT Matthew J. Green matthew.green2@yorksj.ac.uk

maps to academic conceptualisations, although seminal scholar Olweus (1994, p. 1174) noted that bullying involves, 'an imbalance of power in strength (an asymmetric power relationship) in which the student who experiences negative actions struggles to defend him/herself'. Definitions of bullying have proved challenging to implement within schools given teachers need to determine repetition (Ybarra et al., 2014), intent (Horton, 2011), emotional harm (Mishina et al., 2006), and asymmetric power relationships (Horton, 2020). These subjective judgements may lead to inconsistencies when applying school anti-bullying policies in practice.

Arguably, determining bullying in PE is more nuanced than in classroom-based subjects given PE's often competitive, performance-centred, and team-based nature (Department for Education, 2013). In comparison to other school subjects, PE offers de-routinising experiences within often single-sex lessons which involve gendered behavioural norms, gendered identities, and gendered emotions (Connell, 2008; Metcalfe, 2018; Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020b). These social, psychological and emotional dynamics make PE a fertile ground to examine power imbalances central to bullying within PE. Grounded in ethnographic findings, figurational sociology is drawn upon to analyse how pupils and teachers conceive bullying, how peer commentary is a key power resource within peer-group dynamics, and how pupils navigate bullying.

Literature review

Risk factors for bullying in secondary PE

Perceived low sporting competence is a risk factor for bullying within secondary PE (Brown & Macdonald, 2008; Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020; Wei & Graber, 2023). However, there is some evidence that perceived high sporting achievers may also experience bullying in PE (Hurley & Mandigo, 2010; Noret et al., 2015). Bullying linked to competence often involves the taunting, marginalising, and socially excluding of least competent pupils (Hay & Macdonald, 2010; Hills, 2007; Wei & Graber, 2023). Several scholars have argued that this risk factor is perpetuated by PE curricula that are dominated by competitive team-based games, whereby sporting bodies are highly successful and valued (Brown & Macdonald, 2008; Hill, 2015; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). Such evidence is predominantly gathered from single-sex boys PE and often attributed to traditional and hegemonic forms of masculinity (Bramham, 2003; Connell, 2008; Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020b). Given PE's structural, social and cultural norms, this risk factor is less likely to appear in classroom-based subjects. However, more female-centred insights are needed, something addressed within this article.

Bullying within secondary PE changing rooms

Changing rooms are locations where bullying is often prevalent in PE (Atkinson & Kehler, 2012; Jachyra, 2016; Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020a). This subject-specific location involves pupils changing their attire in often unsupervised conditions, with some teachers reluctant to position themselves in changing rooms given sensitivities regarding adults gazing at semi-naked children (Atkinson & Kehler, 2012; Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020a). For some pupils, peer gazing and negative commentary during the changing process can induce shame and embarrassment (Jachyra, 2016; Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020a). Such emotions can be heightened for perceived overweight pupils who can experience weight stigmatisation from peers (Li & Rukavina, 2012; Peterson et al., 2012). Collectively, this evidence demonstrates how bullying can take place before and after active PE lessons within these distinctive social processes.

Responses to bullying in PE

Pupils are unlikely to report instances of bullying within PE (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020; Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020a; O'Connor & Graber, 2014). This could be because of a culture of silence, whereby boys

fear negative social ramifications and reputational damage if reporting bullying (Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020a). Boys also bemoan PE teacher favouritism towards sporty pupils, which they feel hinders teachers' responses to bullying (Atkinson & Kehler, 2012; Hay & Macdonald, 2010; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). This leaves the onus on teachers to intervene which proves challenging due to shifts towards more pervasive forms of bullying, such as verbal, social exclusion and emotional (Mierzwinski et al., 2019). However, teachers may contribute to an 'acculturation of bullying' (O'Connor & Graber, 2014, p. 405) through their dismissiveness of verbal harassment, espoused by their 'laissez faire attitudes' which may legitimise bullying (Jachyra, 2016, p. 130). In some cases, teachers actively contribute to verbal harassment by openly mocking and criticising perceived less-competent boys (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). These attitudes and actions may be gendered with Peterson et al. (2012) finding that female PE teachers were more likely to challenge weight-based bullying than their male colleagues. This evidence implies that not all PE teachers are well-versed in anti-bullying policies, with some perpetuating gendered behavioural norms that can contribute to a culture of silence.

Figurational sociology

Central to figurational sociology is the concept of figuration, described by Elias (2000, p. 136) as 'a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people'. This concept derived from Elias's (1978) emphasise that individuals should not be studied as isolated beings, but instead should be viewed in relation to their networks of interdependencies. Therefore, bullying as a social process that takes place within a PE figuration whereby pupils are timetable-bound and often compete alongside and against each other (Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020a). This perspective avoids the tendency to view bullying as a dyad interaction involving a bully and a victim but instead highlights the significance of structured social networks (Salmivalli, 2010). Here, how people conceive and navigate bullying is part enabled and constrained by the dominant social processes and prevailing behavioural norms within a PE figuration, and part influenced by the other figurations that they form, such as family, friends and community. These enabling and constraining social processes are significant given Elias's (1978) view that power ratios are rarely equal and Olweus's (1994) reference the asymmetric power ratios within bullying.

Recognition that bullying is aimed at certain groups appears to align somewhat with Elias and Scotson's (1965/1994) concept of established–outsider relations. Analysing power relations between three separate social groups, Elias and Scotson (1965/1994) found that gossip proved an effective resource for established group members to distinguish from and stigmatise members from one outsider group. This power resource was effective due to socially cohesive lines of communication between established group members, which fostered praise gossip and group charisma based upon a positive 'we-image' (Elias & Scotson, 1965/1994). In contrast, outsider group members had weaker social ties, rendering gossip ineffective, nullifying the potential to espouse group charisma. Instead, blame gossip based upon a negative 'they-image' within the community figuration was internalised by some outsider group members as part of their group disgrace (Elias & Scotson, 1965/1994). The existing literature suggests that male sporty pupils form an established group who use peer commentary to socially exclude and stigmatise their less-competent peers. Such verbal bullying may be part enabled by some PE teachers closeness with some sporty pupils, and the normalising of competence-based defamation.

In this sense, established–outsider relations in PE may involve pupils embodying differing degrees of sporting identities, which are significant within pupil–peer and teacher–pupil relations. Therefore, Elias's (2001) personal pronoun model is used to emphasise the inherent social nature of identities. Noting how from birth humans enter figurations, Elias (2001) argued that an individual's 'I' identity should not be analysed without considering the significance of the associated 'we-' and 'they-' identities. Due to this plurality, this model makes visible tensions and power imbalances within and between different social groups (Nielsen & Thing, 2019). Nielsen and Thing's (2019) found that within sporting figurations secondary school pupils often affiliate their 'I'-identity with the desirable

'we-group' identity to avoid being outcasted into a 'they-group'. However, how young people navigate their identity expression is not fixed but involves negotiating differing 'We-I' identities. Similarly, Mierzwinski and Velija (2020a) found that boys seldomly report bullying to preserve their 'I' identity, which plays a significant part in upholding a culture of silence.

In this paper, pupil–peer relations are examined as being enabled and constrained within the PE figuration. Specifically, Elias and Scotson's (1965/1994) concept of established–outsider relations is applied to determine the role of peer commentary as an effective power resource. To supplement this theorising, Elias's (2001) personal pronoun model is drawn upon to determine the significance of sporting competence within pupils' 'We-I' identity formation/expressions and the influences this has on how pupils navigate bullying. Combined, this concept and model enable sociogenic dimensions (i.e. structure and delivery of PE) and psychogenic dimensions (i.e. identity/emotion-laden behaviours) to be analysed within the PE figuration.

Methods

In this paper, data is drawn from a broader ethnographic case study which included examining pupils–peers in boys and girls PE. Fieldwork was conducted by the first author in one state-funded secondary school in the north of England, pseudonymised throughout as, Lord Taylors School (LTS), between January and July 2022. During this time, LTS had 1500 pupils enrolled, of which approximately 20% of the pupils were eligible for pupil premium funding, approximately 15% of pupils were Black or Minority Ethnic (BME), and approximately 10% of pupils had a registered special educational need or disability (SEND). The provision of PE included bi-weekly core (compulsory) PE lessons, facilitated by five male and three female PE teachers. Pupils were grouped in mixed-ability, sex-segregated and year-group-based classes, often taught by same-sex teachers.

Data collection

After gaining university ethical approval, data collection consisted of 120 PE lessons observations. A pocket-sized notebook was used to record how PE was structured and delivered and how pupils related and interacted with each other. Fourteen focus groups with 49 pupils across Years 7 (11–12 years), 10 (14–15 years), and 11 (15–16 years) were conducted during the final 2 months of the study. Akin to PE classes, all focus groups were single-sex, involved between three and seven pupils, and asked pupils: how they defined bullying? What they felt instigated bullying? And, how bullying is navigated within and across PE settings? Similar questions were also posed to nine teachers during individual semi-structured interviews, also completed during the final two months of the case study. Collectively, these methods enabled data to be triangulated in respect to sociogenic dimensions (i.e. structure and delivery of PE) and psychogenic dimensions (i.e. identity/emotion-laden behaviours) within the PE figuration.

Data analysis

All observational field-notes, focus group transcripts, and interview transcripts were pseudonymised to protect pupils' and teachers' identities. Upon leaving the field, all data was imported into NVivo-12, a qualitative data analysis software which aided navigation and visualisation of the large data set. From here, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phased guide to thematic analysis was followed, whereby the first author followed the following steps across a six-month period: (1) familiarisation with the entire data; (2) generation of initial codes and identifying emerging themes; (3) searching and developing themes; (4) reviewing and revising themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) writing this article. During phase one, the first author systematically categorised the entire data set (i.e. observations of girls' PE, observations of boys' PE, focus group interviews), before refamiliarising himself with the data, recording initial ideas and emerging patterns whilst doing so. In relation to

the focus of this paper, initial notes were then formalised into 28 codes, which included competence-based bullying, gendered forms of peer commentary, and fear of stigmatisation. When developing and reviewing themes, concepts of figuration, power, established–outsider relations, and 'I-we-they'-identities were used as sensitising tools. Phase four involved the generation of the following themes: (a) sporting competence as a key power resource; (b) competence and performative aesthetics as gossip-worthy behaviours (c) young people's 'I-we'-identity protection when navigating bullying in PE. The co-authors then reviewed the thematic map and defined themes, corroborating the empirical and theoretical findings, before finally aiding the first author in the writing of this article.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

Common with school ethnographies, the researcher made notes from a participant observer position, often sitting and/or standing on the periphery during lessons and activities. As such, the first author did not influence the structure or delivery of lessons, nor impact upon peer-group dynamics. However, this positioning enabled familiarity, but not personally closeness, with each pupil, aiding the recruitment and facilitation of focus group. During focus groups, the first author was conscious of how pupils may view his male athletic identity when discussing sporting competence as a risk factor to bullying. Aware of this, the researcher adopted a neutral stance by removing favouritism towards any pupils and ensuring discussions were sensitive towards perceptions of pupils' difference (i.e. ability, ethnicity, gender, SEND). Having spent over six months based in the PE office, the first author was familiar with each PE teacher interviewed. This familiarity enabled the necessary trust and rapport needed during interviews, enabling more conversational discussions within the formal setting. To ensure degrees of consistency, stress was placed on following the semi-structured guide to ensure detailed comprehension and specific examples were captured.

Throughout undertaking these researcher positions, the first author made daily reflections. Reflections mostly referred to interactions with participants, the managing the researchers' personal and academic identity, and various inevitable methodological and ethical tensions within the research process. For example, the researcher noted how as a white male in his mid-20s his perceived personal identity may have affected relations within and across differing pupil and teacher social groups. During pupil and teacher interactions and whilst undertaking peripheral observer positions, the researcher also had to manage his academic identity as a non-PE teacher. For instance, the researcher, where possible, ensured he was accompanied by a PE teacher to remove any onus on intervening and reporting bullying. Whilst such strategies were documented from the outset within ethical forms, throughout the research process the first author benefited from regular discussions with both co-authors who served as critical friends and advisors.

Results

Pupils' and teachers' conceptualisations of bullying

When asked to define bullying, pupils referenced repetition and intent to harm, as per the Department for Education's (2017) definition. Forty-six of the 49 pupils cited 'repetition' or iterations. For example, for Olive (Year 7), 'bullying is done like repetitively', and for Freddie (Year 11), 'it's constant, it's done constantly'. When probed, pupils were unable to quantify what determined repetition, other than phrases such as 'over a long period of time' (Elliot, Year 7). PE teachers failed to provide any further clarification, with Mr Walker explaining, 'if it is repeated over time, then that is bullying'. In some respects, this omission is not surprising given that anti-bullying policy fails to quantify repetition (Department for Education, 2017). In practice, without repetition been either quantified in policy and/or agreed by teachers', subjective judgements of what constitutes repetition can be inconsistent.

For pupils, bullying needed to contain an intention to harm. Eloise (Year 7) suggested that bullying happens when someone, 'purposefully makes them [victim] feel bad', whilst for Erin (Year 10),

'bullying is anything that is offensive and meant to be harmful'. As evidenced here, pupils' conceptualised bullying as a 'goal-directed behaviour' intended to cause emotional harm (Department for Education, 2017; Volk et al., 2014). However, Erin's reference to offense highlights challenges pupils faced when determining intent in perceived humorous interactions. Charlie (Year 7) stressed, 'you can never know how badly you are hurting someone because you could just be like trying to have fun'. Similarly, Neve (Year 11) considered how, 'people might take it [banter] the wrong way and they might say it's bullying when it might not be bullying'. Irrespective of age, pupils were aware that comments could be deemed funny by the orator, hurtful by the receiver, and make bystanders laugh, illustrating perceptions of what is funny and what is harmful, also identified elsewhere (Booth et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2023). Like with repetition, without an agreed social contract concerning appropriate humour and what causes offensive, subjective judgements concerning intent are likely to be inconsistent.

Finally, the Department for Education (2017) definition draws reference to how bullying is 'often aimed at certain groups', whilst Olweus (1994) added how asymmetric power imbalances are central to the bullying process. Only one pupil specifically cited power when defining bullying, with Patricia (Year 10) stating, 'it's like an imbalance of power'. Offering a more specific insight for whom power imbalances may reside in PE, Miles (Year 10) noted that, 'they [sporty peer] kind of bully them because they are not as good at sport. Whereas if you are better at it, you can have that higher ground'. Sharing this sentiment, Mr Wharfedale indicated that, 'bullying would be where it is a more talented sportsman who goes about abuse, not abuse, well in a way it is verbal abuse towards other people in the class who do not perform at their level'. Given that power only features in academic conceptualisation of bullying, it is not surprising how little this word featured in pupils' definitions. What did consistently feature was which groups of pupils were most likely to experience power advantages over others in PE. By their nature, such conceptualisations omitted social and psychological processes which enable such power advantages between different pupil–peer groups. How such processes are enacted are now examined through a more gender-specific and observation-based focus.

Boys PE, peer-group dynamics, and enacting power imbalances

Across observations, focus groups and interviews, there was a consistent finding of some boys using their superior sporting competence to dictate where perceived less sporty peers should be positioned. In core PE, for Tom (Year 10), bullying involved 'pushing them [less-sporty peers] around, I guess, say in football, "you go in goal every time", or you tell them to go in certain positions'. Such behaviour often went unchallenged meaning perceived non-sporty boys often undertook less-desirable positions, which they often disliked. This marginalising process served to distinguish and distance some sporty boys from other less sporty boys, which could contribute to negative attitudes towards incompetence. Referring to this, Mr Wilkinson noted how, 'we might see some of the more lower-level stuff, "I don't want to be with him, he's rubbish". You know which is bullying in a sense'. Despite knowing this, teachers contributed highlighting ability difference between pupil–peer groups by appointing sporty boys as team captains.

> The pupils were asked to line up and Mr Harris selected two captains for the football game, both understood to be the two best footballers in the class. The process of both captains taking it in turns to choose a peer fostered peer reactions and commentary, including, 'why have you picked him? He's crap' or 'yes, pick him, he's good'. (Field-note Year 11 Boys PE – Football – Sports Field)

Whilst endorsing public displays of sporting superiority and not sanctioning such peer commentary, Mr Harris altered the selected teams by swapping three boys to make the teams fairer. However, within younger boys PE lessons, public displays of differences in sporting ability were highlighted by teachers requesting sporty boys to provide skill demonstrations and/or peer-feedback.

Less-competent boys had little opportunity to undertake such positions and, instead, were often blamed by their more competent peers for their perceived inadequate performances.

> During a series of five-a-side games, non-sporty pupils were repeatedly blamed for their team losing a game, which led to the team being rotated off the pitch. Whilst often short-lived, verbal slurs such as, 'oh my god, you are shocking' were regularly directed towards non-sporty pupils. Despite visible frustrated responses from targeted pupils, such comments with either ignored or met with calls of 'just get on with it boys' by Mr Wharfedale. Such practices were less common in younger boys PE, but were frequently observed within older boys PE, whereby approximately 90 percent of lesson were team-based games. Collectively, these practices enabled and legitimised peer commentary concerning sporting competencies and, thus, altering peer-group dynamics. (Field-note Year 10 Boys PE – Football – Gymnasium)

One other observable trend in older boys' peer-group dynamics was the social exclusion of less-sporty boys. Mr Morley explained, 'the person who isn't as good at sport, they tend to get ignored quite a bit'. Whilst excluded by peers, some boys removed themselves from the performance spotlight, ensuring they were on the periphery of competitive team-based games. Sporty pupils where aware of and frustrated by such avoidance tactics, as Freddie (Year 11) noted, 'like Frankie, he just stands at the side of the pitch and does nothing', whilst Elliot (Year 11) reflected, 'that annoys people in PE the most. When people are not trying and then it is visibly affecting your game and you get angry at them'. As well as sporty boys, PE teachers were occasionally observed getting visually frustrated by some boys' lack of active participation. These findings demonstrate how a competence-based marginalising process involved peer social exclusion and self-exclusion, with the latter worsening peer– and teacher–pupil relations.

Girls PE, peer-group dynamics, and enacting power imbalances

In comparison to boys PE, sporting competence and subsequent explicit peer commentary was observed as being less significant within girls' peer-group dynamics. This may be due to some nuanced differences in how girls PE was structured, less direct positioning of sporty pupils within lessons, and a trend of more in-group as opposed to between group peer-commentary. Girls PE involved more individual activities (i.e. dance, fitness, and trampolining), resulting in was less team-based competitive games – approximately 40%. This meant there was less need for captains, which was further minimised by teachers allowing girls to self-select their teams or groups. Despite this, some girls used sporting competence to distinguish themselves from their less-competent peers, with Ellie (Year 10) reflecting, 'I think there is another problem with people who are good at sport, often they do rub it in other people's faces'. However, compared with boys PE, friendship groups held more significance in determining peer-groups and influencing peer-group dynamics, Alice stated (Year 10):

> Like when we were playing basketball the other day, and I play basketball quite a lot and I am really quick runner, but no one knows that because I am always in the teams where we actually don't do anything. So, people tend to shut you out and not pass you the ball. They will pass to their mates, so it does end up being that group who ends up in control of everything.

This further illustrates how girls PE involved less explicit performance-based blame peer commentary but could include more exclusionary practices based upon peer bonds and in-group membership.

Within such in-groups, girls peer commentary also centred upon aesthetics and performative acts. When speaking to this trend, Miss Jones referenced,

> It's more about in expressional terms, like 'oh my god, what is she doing? What is she wearing? Look at how she is doing that? Look at how red her face has gone'. So, it's all the negative connotations which stick with the girls, and they don't want to be involved.

These more discrete comments were also observed across all year groups, but more likely amongst older girls.

> Four 'sporty' girls were using the spinning bikes, situated along the back wall facing towards the centre of the room. These girls were closely watching six peers using free-weights, repeatedly making comments behind their hands, often laughing amongst each other. Noting this, the six girls changed their activity leaving the fitness suite to use the skipping ropes outside. (Field-note Year 10 Girls PE – Fitness – Fitness Suite)

These types of interactions were also reported by pupils, with Abbie (Year 10) noting how, 'if there was any bullying it would be behind their backs … it would be like gossip and rumours', and Natalie (Year 11) further explaining how, 'it's probably making fun out of people without them realising, that happens quite a lot. A lot more than direct bullying'. This finding reveals clear distinctions from boys' peer-group dynamics, with girls less likely to directly defame and/or chastise their less-competent peers. Instead, girls peer-group dynamics were more friendship-based with peer commentary being more in-group, discrete, and, therefore, less confrontational. Whilst such commentary was labelled as bullying, its private nature contains less intent to harm given that they are not intended to reach the victim when spoken. However, should gossip and rumours surface, they would induce considerable harm.

Fear, self-preservation, and pupils' navigations of bullying in PE

Given the peer-group dynamics cited above, some pupils had to navigate peer-relations which included bullying. This process was mainly driven by pupils' fears of social repercussions, their reports being dismissed, and perceptions of teacher favouritism. Whilst pupils understood the need to combat bullying, they also voiced concerns in challenging and reporting. Patricia (Year 10) suggested, 'bystanders don't want to get involved because they don't want to get bullied themselves', whilst Charlie (Year 7) similarly noted, 'if they stand up against the bully, the bully might come for me next time. So, they won't do it'. Concerns regarding social repercussions extended to victims and bystanders who wished to avoid negatively labelling. Referring to this, Reece (Year 7) noted how, 'they might call you a grasser or something', whilst Patricia stated, 'no one really wants to talk to teachers because you get called a snitch'. Such targeting and labelling meant pupils often failed to challenge and/or report instances of bullying. Instead, victim and bystander behaviour often centred upon stoic responses. Ellie (Year 10) noted, 'it feels better to keep it in and then they [the bully] will realise to stop doing it eventually'. Collectively, these findings demonstrate the significance pupils placed on managing their emotional and identity expressions when navigating bullying in PE.

Pupils' lack of reporting of bullying was acknowledged teachers, with Mr Walker noting:

> No one has ever come up to me and said, 'I am being bullied' or 'they are bullying me'. It has been brought to my attention that someone hasn't been very nice or hasn't said very nice things and depending on the severity I will deal with it in the lesson, or I will take it further.

Clearly, even when pupils did report negative peer interactions many did not use the term bullying, leaving the onus on the teacher to judge whether reported behaviour was bullying. If deemed bullying, teachers would intervene, however how they responded could determine whether pupils reported cases at all, with Jessica (Year 11) noting how, 'sometimes a pupil might go to a teacher but then the teacher does more than the pupil wants them to do. So, the teacher does too much and that makes the pupil never want to speak up about it again'. Further impacting on pupils' decisions whether to report bullying was how they assessed their relationship with their PE teacher and that of the perpetrator's. This consideration was discussed by Elliot and Freddie (both Year 11):

> Elliot: I can't see them trusting a teacher.
> Freddie: Because a lot of the PE teachers are quite friendly with the students. I think a lot of PE teachers put it [bullying] to the side, especially with the more popular kids … especially if it is one of their favourites. Like there is a PE teacher who has a particular favourite and it's like he could do anything and get let off.

This demonstrates not only the significance of peer-group relationships and feared social repercussions of challenging and/or reporting bullying, but also the importance of consistent teacher responses to bullying, whether perceived or actual.

Discussion

Given this paper's focus on how pupils enacted and navigated bullying in PE, it was important to ascertain how pupils and those responsible for combatting bullying, teachers, conceptualised the term bullying. Irrespective of age and gender, pupils consistently defined bullying in accordance with the Department for Education's (2017) definition. However, pragmatic issues were evident when needing to determine repetition (Horton, 2011), intent to harm (Volk et al., 2014), and whether comments caused offense (Mishina et al., 2006). Struggles to quantify repetition may partly be due to three-day gaps between and transitionary phases within PE lessons (i.e. such as shifts from changing rooms to activity spaces). The often vast, open, and often social spaces used within PE also made judging intent to harm, real or perceived, challenging as peer commentary often took place within and across noisy peer groups. Pupil comments regarding peers' sporting competency and/or aesthetics were frequent and seemingly normalised (Bramham, 2003; Brown & Macdonald, 2008; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). These PE-specific social dynamics and behavioural norms influenced the extent to which such comments either caused offense or were deemed offensive. Despite consistent definitions, combined these two ambiguous areas contributed to inconsistent judgements concerning what constituted bullying, with a reluctance to label peer commentary as bullying. Peer commentary often took place between different social peer groups, which is significant given that bullying is 'often aimed at certain groups' (Department for Education, 2017) and involves imbalances of power or strength (Olweus, 1994).

In boys PE, sporting competency was highly valued (particularly amongst older boys) and was used to differentiate some pupils from others. Viewing boys PE as a figuration (Elias, 2000), the frequency of competitive team-based sports – approximately 90% of Year 10 and 11 PE lessons – enabled an established group of sporty males to exercise power advantages over less-sporty outsider group peers (Elias & Scotson, 1965/1994). Male PE teachers contributed to such power imbalances by regularly selecting certain sporty boys as captains, a practice which strengthened established-group members group charisma and 'we-image'. This visibility before the activity took place was compounded by captains selecting captains' selecting peers based upon perceived sporting competency, marginalising and causing group disgrace amongst outsider group members. Group charisma and group disgrace were further fostered by teachers' tendency to invite the most competent boys to provide skill demonstrations, as well as sporty pupils dictating where their perceived less-competent peers should be positioned (i.e. goalkeeper). These social and emotional processes foregrounded established-group members defaming and/or disparaging peer commentary (Brown & Macdonald, 2008; Jachyra, 2016; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011) and frequent blaming of outsider group members for defeat in games. Outsider group members had little opportunity to control or resist such marginalising and alienating practices or counteract such ridiculing given their lack of sporting competence, a key distinguishing factor between the two social groups. Established group members used peer commentary as an effective power resource to distinguish and ridicule outsider group peer, a process enabled and legitimised by PE teachers, who occupied positions of significant power. Therefore, seeking to avoid being publicly chastised and blamed, it is understandable why some outsider group members removed themselves from the performance-spotlight (Jachyra, 2016; Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). Arguably, outsider group members self-exclusion evidenced how they internalised their group disgrace and demonstrated their acute awareness of how their lack of competence would attract damaging peer commentary (Elias & Scotson, 1965/1994). Collectively, these processes strengthened the social cohesiveness within the

established group, whilst simultaneously alienating, marginalising, and/or publicly embarrassing outsider group members, as well as evidencing how targeted pupils may struggle to defend themselves (Olweus, 1994).

Our findings concerning girls verbal commentary within and across peer groups bridges an empirical gap in data concerning bullying in girls PE, whilst providing useful comparative analysis. Viewing girls PE as a figuration, sporting competence was less significant in peer-group dynamics partly due to only approximately 40% of time being devoted towards competitive team-based games. Less captains reduced the selecting and positioning of peers, as well reducing frustration-led peer chastising and game-related blaming. Whilst this figurational structure suited perceived less sporty girls and contributed to less-socially cohesive relations between PE teachers and competent girls (in comparison to males), it carried an unintended social consequence of disengagement for some outsider group members (Hills, 2007). To encourage activity engagement, female PE teachers enabled girls to self-select working groups, which mostly were made up of three to six friends. Despite reduced team games, older girls' friendship groups were still largely determined by shared ability and fondness of PE. Sporty girls formed an established group through their use of gossip-led peer commentary concerning less-able outsider group members (Elias & Scotson, 1965/1994). The effectiveness of this power resource resided in its in-group, less direct, and more discrete manner, largely enacted through gossiping (i.e. voiced behind hands) and laughing at how peers looked when performing sporting acts (Hills, 2007). The extent to which such commentary contributed to group charisma and group disgrace (Elias & Scotson, 1965/1994) was determined by outsider group members reluctance to replicate performance and/or aesthetic-based gossiping as a communicative style. Instead, they often ceased active participation and/or removed themselves from a peer's gaze to avoid such embarrassing situations and performance-based ridicule. The pervasiveness nature of gossip made detecting, reporting, and intervening difficult for pupils and teachers (Mierzwinski et al., 2019).

The presented gendered figurational structures, established–outsider relations, peer-group dynamics effected how pupils navigated bullying in PE. Due to how defamatory peer commentary was normalised and legitimised in boys PE and more pervasive in girls PE, the onus was on pupils to actively deal with bullying. Irrespective of age and gender, pupils consistently opted against intervening (as bystanders) and reporting (as bystander or victim) and, in doing so, bypassed government, school, and best practice guidance (Brown, 2018; GOV.UK, 2023; Horton, 2011). This approach was mainly driven by pupils' fear of being targeted, stigmatised and/or socially excluded (Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020a; O'Connor & Graber, 2014). Such fears demonstrate the importance pupils placed on not jeopardising their 'I'-identity (reputation) and their 'I-we' peer-relations (social positioning), ensuring that they were not ostracised within a 'they' group (socially excluded) (Elias, 2001; Nielsen & Thing, 2019).

Pupils' decision not to report bullying was further informed by their fear of being dismissed by teachers given the normalising of targeted peer commentary within PE. Furthermore, pupils were concerned that teachers' immediate reactions would compromise their 'I'-identity. In some cases, perceived teacher favouritism towards more established pupils who embodied the dominant 'we-group' identity and were most likely to make such comments prevented more outsider-group members from reporting bullying (Atkinson & Kehler, 2012). When pupils approached teachers, they rarely used the term bullying, which made teacher interventions harder but avoided detrimental labels such as snitch and grass. The significance of not being stigmatised with such labels demonstrates the importance pupils placed on how their peers perceived their 'I'-identity and group status (Nielsen & Thing, 2019), as well as the power of gossip and labelling within peer-group dynamics. As such, pupils rationalised that being stoic was the best way to navigate bullying. Collectively, pupils' identity and emotion-laden decisions contributed to a culture of silence when reporting bullying (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020; Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020a; O'Connor & Graber, 2014).

Conclusion

In this article, we examined how secondary school pupils enacted and navigated bullying within PE. Through examining boys and girls PE as figurations we demonstrated how the gendered structure of PE, the subject-specific behavioural norms, and single-sex peer-group dynamics collectively contributed to the valuing of sporting competence in boys PE and performance aesthetics in girls PE, as well as nuances in how bullying was enacted. Applying established–outsider relations proved useful to demonstrate how established group members used peer commentary as an effective power resource to build, maintain and/or strengthen social cohesion amongst sporty peers and distinguished themselves from the group disgrace that they part attributed to outsider group members. Given the value of sporting/athletic competence and the normalising and legitimising of peer commentary, less-sporty/competent pupils were unable to overcome their group disgrace, alter their social status, or call upon teachers to challenge the ridiculing, marginalising, and ostracising behaviours of some established group members. As such, within the PE figuration, established–outsider relations were relatively static and flat, in the sense that few conflicts and hierarchies within each group were evident.

To further explain how identity management and emotional self-restraint influenced the way pupils navigated significant power imbalances and bullying within peer-relations we applied the personal pronoun model. This model enabled us to demonstrate the role of 'I'-identity underpinning pupils' self-preservation, the role of 'I-we-they'-identities foregrounding fears of being ostracised and occasional scepticism regarding teacher favouritism. While knowledge of such social, psychological, and emotional processes somewhat rationalises pupils approaches towards peer-conflict, we demonstrate how such stoic responses contributed to a culture of silence by reducing potential pupil-informed teacher interventions. One unintended outcome of stoic responses was how established–outsider relations between sporty/competent pupils and their less-competent peers were maintained, preserving social cohesiveness amongst established group members and minimising outsider group members to actively challenge what seemingly had become normalised peer commentary.

Collectively, our empirical and theoretically informed findings provide a different perspective from dyad (bully-victim-bystander) informed analysis of school bullying and demonstrate the need to focus on subject-specific peer-group dynamics. Our figurational perspective positions bullying as an inherently social process, whereby power resides in the relationship between people and the groups they form, both of which are enabled and constrained by figurational dynamics. Here, peer commentary proved an effective power resource to distinguish established from marginalised outsider group members, a process largely normalised due to ambiguities regarding appropriate comments and judging intent to harm.

To substantiate our theorising, future studies should apply the concept established–outsider relations to PE departments whereby lessons are co-educational, ability-setted, and/or less-dominated by competitive team-based games and include more diverse pupil and teacher demographics. Furthermore, cognisant of Bloyce and Murphy's (2007) concerns regarding the robustness of the concept, a longitudinal study over at least three years would explore the rigidity of such established–outsider relations, whilst exploring the extent to which pupils may accept, change, or reject dominant 'I-we-they'-identities and group images. Undertaking such research would test the flexibility of this concept within environments where peer-group dynamics are less structurally informed, where sporting competence is less visual and where performance-based peer commentary is less frequent. As it stands, from our findings, these three domains would be central to practical implications, although we appreciate the possible lack of generalisability ethnographic studies can offer. Interventions could include more consistent curricula delivery of more task-oriented, skill acquisition, and problem-solving team-based activities across all ages and genders. This would possibly reduce the relational effects of zero-sum games and subsequent performance-based commentary, blaming and gossip. Finally, given the subject-specific behavioural norms, we advocate a more

negotiated, possibly co-created, PE-specific code of conduct whereby greater clarity is offered for determining levels of appropriate peer commentary.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval for this research was provided by the University Research Ethics Committee – Reference STHEC0047.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Matthew J. Green http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8065-0446
M. F. Mierzwinski http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9751-5865
C. Haines Lyon http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8341-744X

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